

## FEEDBACK FROM THE FIELD

### DISASTERS AS SOCIAL PROBLEMS?: A DISSENTING VIEW

Robert A. Stallings  
Program in Public Policy  
and  
Department of Sociology  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, California 90089-0041

The nature of natural disasters and how best to conceptualize them are issues that have received renewed interest recently (e.g., Quarantelli 1987; Kreps 1989; May 1989). One proposal calls for treating disasters as social problems. Drabek's (1989) paper on disasters as nonroutine social problems is the most explicit statement of this idea. I do not think that disaster phenomena have features commonly associated with social problems, and therefore I do not believe that such a theoretical reorientation would be beneficial to the field of disaster research. I will try to indicate in this brief piece some of the reasoning behind this conclusion.

### PROBLEMS WITH THE FUNCTIONALIST THEORY OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS

The papers that I have read and the discussions that I have listened to about treating natural disasters as social problems—nonroutine or otherwise—seem to rest on an assumption that there is a single theory of social problems. I have not heard anyone discuss this issue with anything in mind other than what specialists in the field of social problems (e.g., Spector and Kitsuse 1977) would call a functionalist theory. The outstanding feature of this theory is its emphasis on the objective conditions of the social system. Social problems are things gone wrong with the system or things that threaten to make the system go wrong. Presumably, natural disasters would be treated as one class of things that can go wrong with social systems and natural hazards as things that threaten to go wrong.



One problem with the functionalist theory of social problems, of course, is that it begs the question of who decides when things have gone "wrong" and by what criteria (Spector and Kitsuse 1977, pp. 23-30). Quarantelli (1989, p. 23) alludes to this problem when he argues that treating disasters as social problems won't work since disasters have "functional" as well as "dysfunctional" consequences. The work of Scanlon (1988) on "winners" and "losers" comes to mind here as does the work of neo-Marxian disaster theorists (e.g., Clausen et al. 1978) who point out that disasters affect the differing social classes differently.

The problem with a functionalist approach to natural disasters as social problems is that it will provide no empirical referents to determine when or whether disasters are problems or even what kind of problem they may be. There is another theoretical tradition in the study of social problems, however, that provides a considerably better vantage point for addressing the disasters-as-problems issue. This alternative perspective is currently referred to as the constructionist view of social problems (Schneider 1985). Its most concise explication is by Spector and Kitsuse (1973, 1977), but it also has roots in collective behavior such as in the work of Blumer (1971) and Mauss (1975).

### PROBLEMS ARE CONSTRUCTED

Oversimplified, the basic tenet of constructionist theory is that social problems exist when groups press claims identify "putative conditions" that are intolerable and propose solutions for their abolishment. The career of a social problem varies as a function of the resources of claims-pressing groups (including how claims are pursued, resisted, or ignored) and as a consequence of the constraints imposed by the arenas in which claims are pressed (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Mauss (1975) explicitly links the career of social problems to the activities of social movements, although this theoretical connection is somewhat controversial (Mauss 1989).

### DISASTERS ARE NOT OBJECTS OF CLAIMS-PRESSING ACTIVITY

The problem with treating natural disasters as social problems is that disasters lack the organizational base associated with claims pressing in

minous, disasters therefore are not social problems. Let me illustrate this point by distinguishing among several types of phenomena that often co-exist in the aftermath of dramatic events such as major earthquakes or airliner crashes. These frequently-confused phenomena have distinctive forms of social organization associated with them.

At one extreme there are events that are bounded in time and space. An earthquake is one obvious example; so too is a temporary evacuation due to the discovery of toxic chemicals. The spatial and temporal dimensions of events, central to discussions of taxonomy (Kreps 1989; May 1989), are less relevant to the question of the theoretical adequacy of social problems theory than is the matter of the collective "ownership" of events (Gusfield 1981, pp. 10-13). Earthquakes and toxic evacuations as events are owned primarily by emergency planners and emergency responders including news organizations. (Mass media audiences following reconstructed accounts of events through news reports might be thought of as another type of owner, but an audience at best is a mass rather than an organized collectivity capable of sustained activity over time.)

The term risk denotes a wider range of social activity and social organization. For example, radon gas as a hazard associated with the internal environment of homes is part of the agenda of risk professionals (Dietz and Rycroft 1988), risk entrepreneurs, social movement entrepreneurs, and professional movement organizations (McCarthy and Zald 1973, p. 20). Ownership in this instance is not of a situated event having a beginning, a middle, and an ending but of ongoing conditions that exist at several locations. Hence the organizational base of phenomena thought of as risks is more extensive (though largely confined to experts and insiders), and activity associated with them is continual rather than discrete as in the case of events.

Events (as symptomatic of underlying putative conditions) and risks can develop into public issues, but neither is inherently or objectively controversial. Successful promotion by owners or, more intriguingly, unsuccessful disownership (Gusfield 1981, p. 14), is necessary for creating a public divided over and discussing an issue. Current attention to levels of radon gas in homes is an example of public ownership. This type of discourse is different from the everyday discussions of the risks of radon in the narrower arenas of professionals and experts.



Broadest of all in terms of organizational base are social problems. In addition to being objects of attention by all previous forms of collectivities (professional associations, the news media, publics, etc.), social problems in addition are owned by mass membership-based social movements. For example, the environment as a social problem encompasses activities (letter-writing, rallies, nature walks, demonstrations) by numerous movement organizations; public discussion of several rather than a single controversial public issue (radon gas, recyclable materials, toxic waste disposal, acid rain); the efforts of experts and social movement entrepreneurs linked to numerous types of risk; and the occurrence of a multitude of local events (such as an evacuation) providing "raw material" to sustain claims-pressing activity.

A functionalist theory of social problems demands that researchers decide *a priori* whether natural disasters constitute social problems. A constructionist theory of social problems, on the other hand, points to where one can find the empirical evidence with which this question may be answered. The answer does not lie in the results of public opinion polls or in data from surveys of elites and community influentials. Rather, the answer lies in the forms of the collectivities owning the putative condition. Phenomena usefully studied from the perspective of social problems theory have distinctive features, most importantly their association with membership-based social movements.

Using the social constructionist theory of social problems as a measuring device, natural disasters cannot be considered social problems (cf. Short 1989, p. 405). One does not see spokespersons for a "natural disaster movement" competing with representatives from the environmental movement, the Pro-Choice and Pro-Life Movements, the Gay Rights Movement, and so forth for space in public arenas such as the general audience media (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). The issue of natural disasters and what to do about them is not a topic of public discussion that remains on the public policy agenda year after year. The political "clout" of disaster planners and emergency responders is highly limited.

In short, social problems have to do with power. They are not merely the dysfunctions of social systems, however these may be judged. Until natural disasters comprise part of the agenda of a social movement with sufficient political resources to influence public discourse and to attract the

attention of elites (Rossi et al. 1982; Mittler 1989), a social problems approach to natural hazards and disasters is unwarranted.

## REFERENCES

- Blumer, Herbert. 1971. "Social Problems as Collective Behavior." *Social Problems* 18:298-306.
- Clausen, Lars, Paul Conlon, Weiland Jager, and Stephan Metreveli. 1978. "New Aspects of the Sociology of Disaster: A Theoretical Note." *Mass Emergencies* 3:61-65.
- Dietz, Thomas and Robert Rycroft. 1988. *The Risk Professionals*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Drabek, Thomas E. 1989. "Disasters as Nonroutine Social Problems." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 7:253-264.
- Gamson, William A. and Andre Modigliani. 1989. "Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach." *American Journal of Sociology* 95:1-37.
- Gusfield, Joseph R. 1981. *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hilgartner, Stephen, and Charles L. Bosk. 1988. "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model." *American Journal of Sociology* 94:53-78.
- Kreps, Gary A. 1989. "Future Directions in Disaster Research: The Role of Taxonomy." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 7:215-241.
- McCarthy, John D., and Mayer N. Zald. 1973. *The Trend of Social Movements in America: Professionalization and Resource Mobilization*. Morristown, New Jersey: General Learning Press.
- Mauss, Armand L. 1975. *Social Problems as Social Movements*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Lippincott.
- . 1989. "Beyond the Illusion of Social Problems Theory." *Perspectives on Social Problems* 1:19-39.
- May, Peter J. 1989. "Social Science Perspectives: Risk and Disaster Preparedness." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 7:281-303.
- Mittler, Elliot. 1989. *Natural Hazard Policy Setting: Identifying Supporters and Opponents of Nonstructural Hazard Mitigation*. Boulder: Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado.
- Quarantelli, E. L. 1987. "Presidential Address: What Should We Study?: Questions About the Concept of Disasters." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 5:7-32.



- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989. "Conceptualizing Disasters From a Sociological Perspective." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 7:243-251.
- Rossi, Peter H., James D. Wright, and Eleanor Weber-Burdin. 1982. *Natural Hazards and Public Choice: The State and Local Politics of Hazard Mitigation*. New York: Academic Press.
- Scanlon, Joseph. 1988. "Winners and Losers: Some Thoughts About The Political Economy of Disaster." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 6:47-63.
- Schneider, Joseph W. 1985. "Social Problems Theory: The Constructionist View." *Annual Review of Sociology* 11:209-229.
- Short, James F., Jr. 1989. "On Defining, Describing and Explaining Elephants (and Reactions to Them): Hazards, Disasters, and Risk Analysis." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 7:397-418.
- Spector, Malcolm, and John I. Kitsuse. 1973. "Social Problems: A Re-Formulation." *Social Problems* 21:145-159.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1977. *Constructing Social Problems*. Menlo Park, California: Cummings.